

Khosrow and Shirin

from the *Khamseh* of Nizami

Retold and abridged in prose by

Peter J. Chelkowski

This is a love story, which has captured the minds of poets and artists in Iran and many other parts of Asia for over 1,400 years. Recited, sung, depicted in many genres of the arts, or just retold for its wonderful plot, *Khosrow and Shirin* is based on the true story of shah Khosow/Khosrov/Khusrau II [Chosroes, ruled 590-628] and his successful pursuit of the woman of his dreams. The lady Shirin, in the version of Nizami (about 1141–1209), is an Armenian princess who becomes queen of Iran after many episodes of folkloric interest. The present English text appears in *Mirror of the Invisible World: Tales from the Khamseh of Nizami* (New York, 1975), pp. 21-48. That magnificent publication, with dozens of color plates of Persian miniatures, is available in full at Internet Archive [here](#).

Khosrow and Shirin

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MIRROR
OF THE
INVISIBLE
WORLD

Tales from the *Khamseh* of Nizami

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ON THE COVER: a decorative leather inside cover from the original binding of the manuscript

FRONTISPICE: detail of Miniature 11, *Bahram Gur in the Sandalwood Pavilion*

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Khosrow and Shirin

In the land of Persia, long ago, lived King Hormuzd the Great. Called "the light of the world's justice," he was the son of the illustrious Khosrow Anushirvan, who had been a king of great renown in his own time. For many years King Hormuzd awaited an heir, a son to assure the continuation of his line. Night and day he prayed to God, and when at last a son was born, his gratitude was boundless. And as his son grew, so grew the king's thankfulness, for the child was a bounding boy of winning eloquence.

Named Khosrow for his grandfather, the boy was called Parviz, "the Victorious One"—such was the king's delight in him. The crown prince excelled in all he did. No star in the northern sky shone with greater brilliance than this magnitude-to-be. By the age of nine he was schooled in all the learned disciplines; in five years more he was an expert horseman and accomplished hunter. A wizard with the sword, the spear, and the arrow, Khosrow soon mastered the art of war. His skill would one day make his beloved Persia the glittering mistress of the East.

Now in the court of Hormuzd was a sage, Bozorg Omid by name, who took it upon himself to counsel both father and son. As he admitted Khosrow to the mysteries of the stars and the even more subtle ways of man and beast, he entreated Hormuzd to be a just and worthy ruler. "What use, Magnificence, to guard your own good with zeal while the state of your subjects goes untended? Who will grant a throne respect when those who uphold it have nothing? The rights of the ruled must always rule: let this byword never leave your thoughts."

Hormuzd, wise son of a wise father, accepted this advice and proclaimed new laws to a fanfare of trumpets. Hormuzd promised to protect his people against theft and destruction of property and to guard the privacy of their homes. Stern edicts, respecting no one person more than another, assured redress for all. And of all the youths in Persia, none admired the uprightness of the king more than his own son.

One morning, he who was the court's darling rode forth to the hunt. Little did Khosrow know, as the sun rose and climbed to the top of its blue dome, that his father's clarion commands would ring so close to his own ears.

It was a glorious day. The sun was bright; the air was clear; and best of all, the game was plentiful. Then, as the sun began its descent, Khosrow and his

companions came upon a pleasant settlement on the green plain. The young prince commandeered a peasant's house for food and lodging, and soon the revelry began. Inspired by his minstrel's tunes and the abundant wine, Khosrow and his companions rocked the house with cheers and drank throughout the night. Lost in wine and laughter, Khosrow was unaware that one of his servants had reeled into the vineyard to pick grapes and so frightened the prince's horse that the steed reared, broke loose, and trampled the peasant's newly sprouted crops.

Daybreak saw the bleary-eyed huntsmen home. With the rising of the golden sun, the outraged peasant's complaint reached the court. Khosrow was brought before the king at once. "No sooner do my decrees go forth than they are trampled by your horse's hooves! Since when, my high-born son, are you to take pleasure at my people's cost?"

The penalties were harsh. The man who had picked the grapes was given to the owner of the vineyard as a slave; the hooves of Khosrow's horse were ruthlessly cut; and Khosrow's princely throne was given to the peasant. Then the minstrel's fingernails were clipped and his harp was unstrung.

Ashamed that his companions should be punished for his sake and pained by his father's wrath, Khosrow begged the elders of the court to plead for his pardon. The counselors, who dearly loved the prince, went to Hormuzd with an apology. So strong was his regret that Khosrow dressed himself in a shroud, took a sharp sword, wept bitterly and writhed on the ground. "Here is my sword, and my submissive head. I can bear any sorrow of this life but the anger of the king." When Hormuzd heard of this speech, he kissed Khosrow and forgave him and made him once again crown prince.

That night, in a dream, Khosrow was visited by his grandfather, Khosrow Anushirvan. "Listen to me," said the old man, "I foresee your happy future because of your willingness to accept chastisement. In place of what you have lost, you will receive four things of even greater worth: you shall ride Shabdiz, the world's swiftest and most fabled steed, who will shake his mane to your glory across a mighty empire bordered by the seas; you shall sit on Taqdis, the throne of thrones, which makes your throne surrendered but a bench; at your bidding Barbad the musician shall play and with the lightest touch will far surpass the broken notes of your lost minstrel. But beyond all these, you shall have Shirin, your destined love, whose sweetness and beauty will sustain you all your days." With this last promise, Khosrow Anushirvan vanished, and the prince awoke.

Now Khosrow's dearest friend and second self was the youth Shapur, a painter of great skill and self-confidence. "When I draw a person's head, it moves; the bird whose wing I draw will fly," he was wont to boast. It was said of Shapur

that his art was so magical that he could draw pictures on water. At portraiture Shapur excelled; he could capture not only the likeness but the subject's very soul.

A born adventurer, Shapur had traveled far and wide. One day, while recounting to Khosrow the many marvels he had seen, Shapur told of a journey to Armenia. He praised the beauty of the mountains, the splendor of the court, and the Armenian queen Mihin Banu. A woman of great wealth and property, Mihin Banu had no husband, yet passed her life content and was stronger than any man. But above all he praised the queen's niece, Shirin. "Her face is a wild rose, and her lips are as sweet as her name. Her charming words please everyone, and she has been chosen as the heir of Queen Mihin Banu. Never have I seen a maiden as enchanting as Shirin! And never have I seen anything like the queen's black horse Shabdiz!"

"Shirin! Did you say Shirin? How astonishing! How fortunate!" Then Khosrow told his friend about the dream and sent Shapur at once to bring Shirin to him. "If she be like wax, impress her with our seal. If her heart be iron, return at once and tell me so that I shall not strike cold iron!"

Thus was Shapur instructed; he promised not to fail. "Fear not, my prince! As long as my brushes and paints attend me, failure has no chance!" And so he departed.

When he reached Armenia it was spring; the mountains were covered with flowers, and the woods and fields were green. While riding, Shapur came upon an aged priest, who lived in a small, ancient monastery carved out of rock high up on a cliff. The old man told a curious tale. "At the foot of this very mountain is a cave, and in the cave is a black stone that every horseman in the world would covet—if he only knew of it. From nearby and faraway plains the swift mares come to this great stone and, when in heat, rub themselves against it. Every foal born to these mares is wonderfully swift; but the swiftest of all is Shabdiz, that horse of lightning hooves, the stallion of our queen."

"I know of him," Shapur replied, and told the priest that he had traveled to Armenia to visit the court. Then the old man pointed to a pretty meadow where the royal party was accustomed to spreading their picnic cloth.

The next morning, at dawn, Shapur went to the pretty meadow. He took a piece of paper in his hand and sketched a portrait of the prince, a likeness so exact as to make the most reluctant maiden swoon. Then he hung the picture from a branch of a tree and hid himself. He did not have to wait long, for soon Shirin appeared with her attendants.

The day shimmered with promise; every leaf danced in the breeze. Shirin and her companions spread their carpets on the grass, and, sipping wine, amused

themselves with singing, dancing to the music of lutes, and fashioning wreaths of flowers for each other. Then, at last, Shirin noticed the portrait. She asked that it be brought to her. She held it in her hands and gazed at the handsome prince. Then her heart dissolved with joy and she embraced the portrait. Frightened at her trembling, and supposing that the picture was the work of evil spirits, her handmaidens destroyed the image and burned rue to stop the spell. Only then did Shirin recover her senses, and the party moved on.

The following morning, Shapur again went to the meadow, made a portrait of the prince, hung it from a branch, and hid. When Shirin appeared and saw the portrait, her soul again took flight. But this time her maids refused to bring the picture to her. They rolled up their carpets and the party fled.

On the third morning, Shirin and her companions set out for a different meadow. Following them, Shapur made yet another portrait, hung it as before, and hid himself. Soon Shirin caught sight of it. She seized it from the branch herself and worshipped it as if it were an idol. In its homage she drank wine; with every sip she kissed the ground. At last, she sent her maids to search for someone who might be able to explain the mystery; but not a soul could be found. Then, at the far end of the meadow, Shirin noticed a stranger. Believing that this person had some knowledge of the portrait, she instructed her attendants to ask if he knew the name and rank of the one who had captured her heart.

When Shapur—for the stranger was none other than the painter—saw the maidens approach, he knew that his stratagem had not failed. To their inquiries, he answered that the secret could be imparted only to Shirin herself. When the maidens gave this message to their mistress, Shirin ran eagerly across the field. As she drew near, Shapur was overwhelmed, so delicate was her beauty.

“Who might you be? Where are you from? What do you know?” she breathlessly asked. Shapur replied that he had traveled far and wide, that he could unlock many mysteries and would divulge the story of the portrait, but only if they were left entirely alone. Shirin dismissed her maidens. The painter then told her that the one she loved was a fine prince, Khosrow Parviz by name. She then confessed that her happiness was so entwined with the portrait that she worshipped it night and day. Whereupon Shapur told how the prince had dreamed about Shirin, his destined love, and had sent him to Armenia to find her. As Shapur spoke, Shirin was overcome with joy.

Then the painter, ever ingenious, devised a plan. The next morning, at dawn, Shirin was to ride to the hunt on Shabdiz and flee from her companions—so swift was the steed that she would not be caught—and she was to journey toward Persia. Then Shapur gave Shirin a seal ring belonging to Khosrow and told her to show it to anyone she met along the way. Perhaps the stranger she met would

be Khosrow himself. Shirin would recognize him, for he would be garbed in red from head to foot; his horse's hooves would be shod with gold. Should Shirin not encounter Khosrow, she must go to the royal palace Moshku, in the capital city of Mada'in, and show the seal ring to the servants there.

Then, with great pride and pleasure in the powers of his palette, Shapur departed; the princess summoned her attendants and returned to the palace of Queen Mihin Banu. That night she pleaded with the queen to be allowed to ride on Shabdiz the next day. As the stallion was exceedingly strong-spirited, the queen was reluctant to agree, but agree she did.

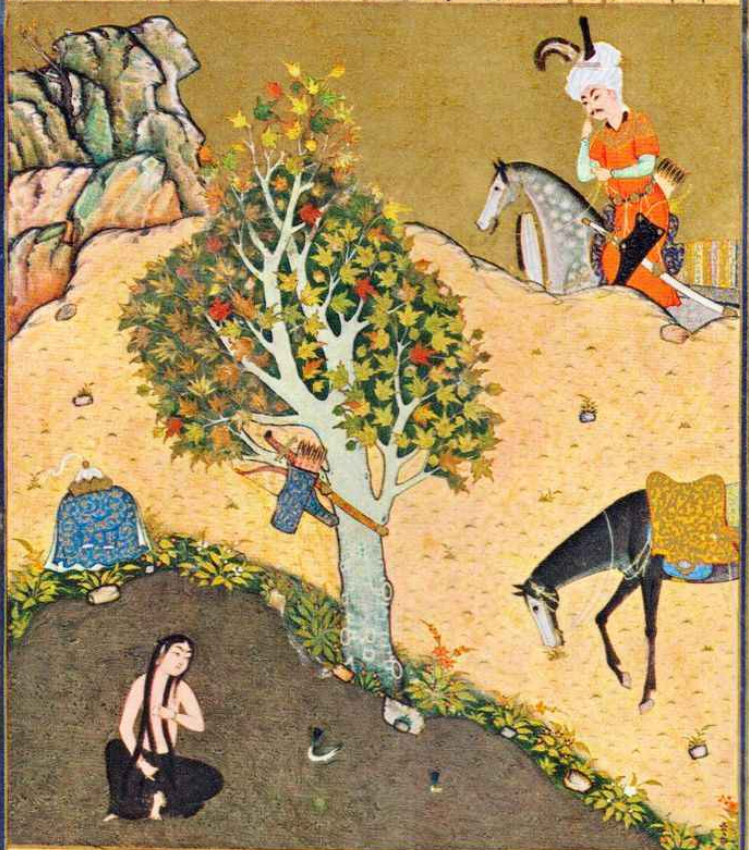
At dawn, Shirin and her attendants made ready for the hunt. Dressed in a manly manner, as was the custom in Armenia for hunting on the plains, the party rode forth at a gallop. Soon Shabdiz had left the other horses far behind. Shirin's companions tried to follow, but in vain, and after spending the day in fruitless search they rode back to the palace with their doleful news. Throughout the night the good queen wept and mourned, but then she had a dream: her beloved falcon flew away, and as she grieved it returned. She took this as a happy omen, and so the next morning, to the amazement of her court, no search was called.

Meanwhile, Shirin rode toward Persia in search of her beloved prince. For fourteen days and fourteen nights she traveled. Then she came upon an emerald field in which there gleamed a gentle pool. Weary and covered with dust from head to foot, she stopped. When she had satisfied herself that she was quite alone, she tethered Shabdiz and prepared to bathe. Beautiful was the whiteness of her skin against the blueness of the water. She loosed her braids and washed her long black hair, and the moon-like reflection of her face was caught in the shallows of the pool. And then she sat in the cool, refreshing water, dreaming of Khosrow.

She did not know that from the very day Khosrow had sent Shapur to Armenia, fate had sent ill fortune to the prince. For Khosrow had enemies in Persia; men who had envied him from the hour of his birth. Now they began to strike coins in his name and to circulate them in the cities of the realm. Hormuzd, thinking his son was plotting to seize the throne, ordered the prince cast into prison. When the good sage Bozorg Omid heard of the decree, he urged Khosrow to flee.

Khosrow rode directly to the palace and told his servants that he would be hunting for a fortnight. If, meanwhile, a beauty appeared, riding a black stallion like a peacock on a raven's back, she was to be welcomed as an honored guest and given every courtesy. Indeed, if the palace was not to her liking, another was to be built for her in any place she might prefer. "See to this as you would to your own safety!" Khosrow ordered and then, disguising himself in robes other than his customary red, he departed for Armenia. So swiftly did he ride

میان کله اویرش تبت	زین رده برابر آسمان تبت	بران بشکه جای ما کشته	موسین کج قناب ز راه تبت
شده از دیدار آن بگوش	شده خورشید بینی آن تفتش	فغانه از دیده بارانی حایسه	کحل لبه تفریح آبسه
پس بجای از غفار پشه	بکسب سرت پیروز کیش راه	جو ماه آهرون از کبرگین	بشاشه بر آه شمشیرین
ز شرم چشم او در شب تاب	مسسه از یزدون در شب تاب	عمایه دید پرشت خدایا	بالای خدکی رسته سزای



بزان راه ندید آن شب تفت	اک کیکو را بچوب برده پراکنه	چراغش ز بر ما بش افروز	بشب خورشیدی نوشیدم روز
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that he covered two days' distance in one. Then, stopping, he ordered his attendants to feed their horses while he rode on alone. Suddenly, he came upon the pool in the emerald field and saw Shirin sitting in the water like a lily. At the sight of her his heart caught fire and burned; he trembled with desire in every limb. Softly he rode toward her and whispered to himself how he would like to have such a beautiful maiden and such a black horse as hers, little knowing that one day they would both be his.

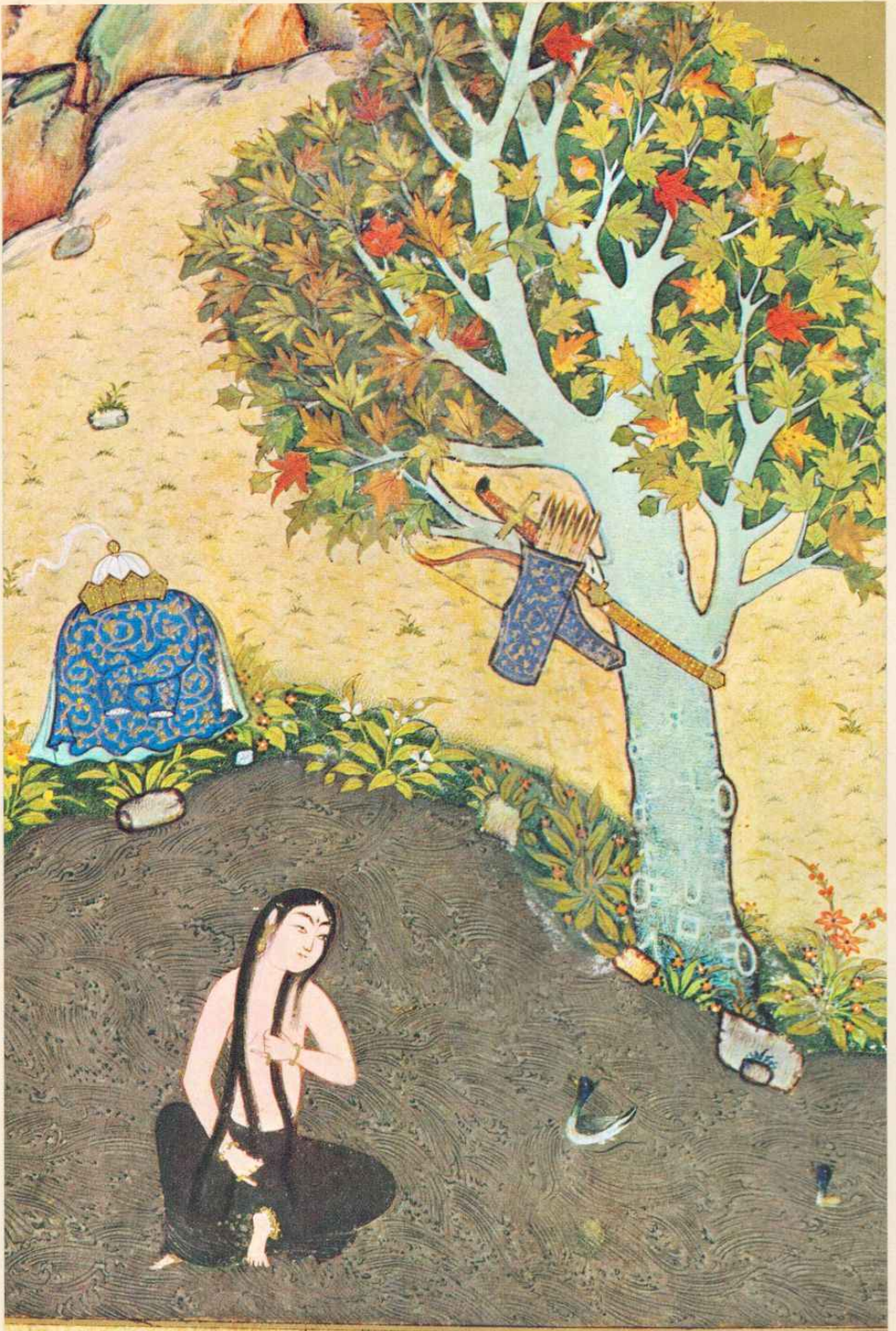
Suddenly Shirin looked up. Startled, she gathered her black hair about her like a cloak, emerged from the pool, dressed, and mounted her horse. At the touch of her heel Shabdiz carried her off into the shadows of the late afternoon. Watching her, Khosrow was as much astonished by the swiftness of her flight as by her beauty. When she had disappeared he wept, then continued his journey toward Armenia.

As she rode, Shirin dwelled on the stranger from whom she had fled. She wondered if he might have been Khosrow even though he was not garbed in red, as Shapur had advised.

Riding on, Shirin finally reached the palace Moshku. She presented the prince's ring and was welcomed with great ceremony; Shabdiz was taken to the stable. When she was asked to tell her story, she refused; she would wait until Khosrow's return. Weeks went by like flights of swallows with not a word from Khosrow. Shirin became uneasy; the palace did not please her, as no window offered happy views. She longed for the green mountains of Armenia; at last she became so restive that the maidservants told her of Khosrow's command that a new residence be built for her should she desire. Shirin eagerly requested that a new palace be built on a mountain plain. The servants, envying her beauty and her privilege, arranged, instead, for the palace to be built in an unhealthy place; a place so hot, the saying went, that it could make a child into an old man in less than a week. It was a place not far from Kermanshah, but far, indeed, from the world. To this prison-palace did Shirin repair, where grief was her constant companion.

By this time, Khosrow had reached the borders of Armenia. When Queen Mihin Banu heard of his arrival, she went with all her retinue to welcome him. A chair was placed for him at the foot of her throne, and she commanded that great festivities be held in his honor. Musicians played, girls danced, and in every tent a fire burned and lavish feasts were set. Game, fruits, and wine were as abundant as the pasturelands and orchards of Armenia. But for Khosrow the wine was bitter; even as he dallied with the pretty maidens, he drank only his desire for Shirin.

One night in the midst of these amusements, Shapur appeared at Khosrow's tent. He kissed the ground before the prince and told of what had passed: how he had



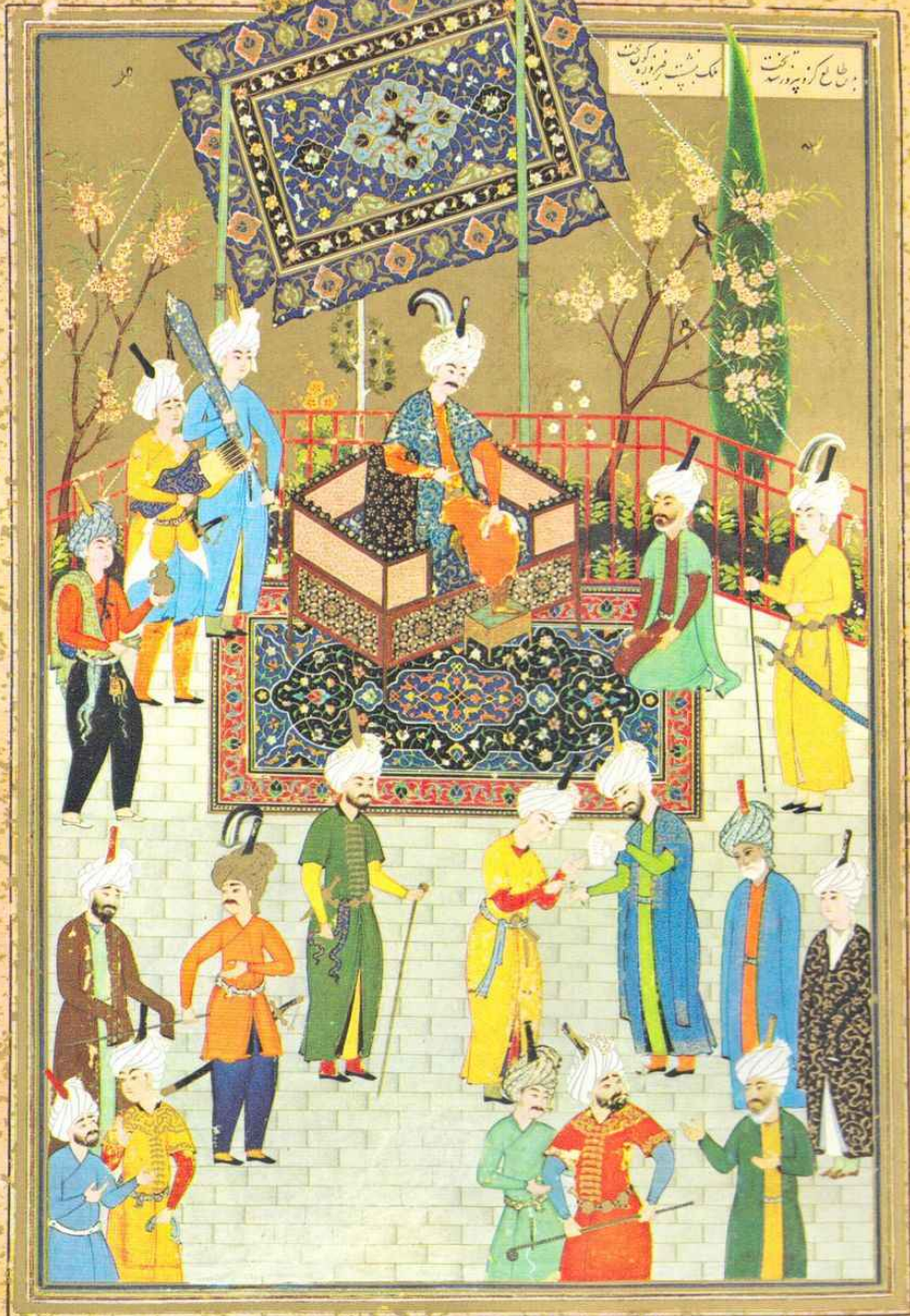
found Shirin and had worked magic with his paints and how Shirin had ridden off on Shabdiz—surely she was at the palace Moshku even now—and he greatly praised her beauty and strong-mindedness. So overjoyed was Khosrow when he heard these words that he covered his friend with jewels and gave him a precious robe. Then he ordered Shapur to go to Shirin as quickly as a moth flies toward a light.

Soon afterward Queen Mihin Banu happened to come to Khosrow's tent, and the prince told her of the messenger who had brought news of Shirin; the faithful Shapur would be sent to bring her back from Persia. As he made ready to depart, the queen ordered her second-swiftest steed, Golgun—sired, like Shabdiz, in the mountain cave—given to Shapur to take with him in case Shirin no longer had Shabdiz. Within the hour, Shapur set out, mounted on his own horse and leading the splendid Golgun.

At last he arrived in Persia and found the disconsolate princess sequestered in her wretched palace. Upon seeing Shapur, Shirin trembled with joy, so long had she despaired of word from Khosrow. The next morning, at the golden break of dawn, they departed in haste for Armenia; Shirin rode Golgun, for Shabdiz had remained in the stable at the palace Moshku. When they reached the court of Queen Mihin Banu there was rejoicing beyond imagining, so happy was the queen to see Shirin.

But while Shapur and Shirin were on their way to Armenia, word had come to Khosrow of the death of his father King Hormuzd, and he had hurried back to Persia to claim his rightful throne. He arrived in the capital city of Mada'in hoping to find Shirin, but she had already departed. Her black stallion Shabdiz was still in the stable, and so to console himself in her absence, Khosrow rode Shabdiz to the hunt, for the young king greatly enjoyed that sport. And after the hunt, he took his pleasure in drinking fine wine.

Khosrow ruled with justice, like his father and grandfather before him, and his subjects were well pleased. But their contentment had not long to last, for soon Bahram Chubin, the wily general who had commanded the armies under Hormuzd, devised a treacherous scheme to seize the throne. He had it whispered among the people that Khosrow had ordered his father killed, and that he was a murderer and unfit to wear the Persian crown. He also had it whispered that Khosrow valued a gulp of wine more than the blood of a hundred brothers, that he would surrender his kingdom for a price, and that he was so distracted by his love for Shirin that he could not rule. Thus did the evil Bahram Chubin spread his subtle plague and turn the people against Khosrow, and once again Khosrow was forced to flee his native land. Under cover of night he saddled Shabdiz and rode toward Armenia—and Shirin. He traveled on without a rest until he neared



بشایع که به پهلوانی
مک است بر او در کار است

the capital of Armenia. Here he interrupted his wearisome journey for the diversion of a hunt.

Now it happened that Shirin also rode to the hunt that morning. And, as was her custom, she rode far ahead of her attendants, for she was ever more spirited than they. In a clearing she came upon a stranger, the very one who had surprised her while she was bathing in the wilderness pool. It was, indeed, Khosrow. A thousand times more beautiful than Khosrow had remembered, was Shirin. Dazzling was the sun at the moment of their encounter, but even more dazzling were their eyes. They reined in their horses and sat gazing at one another, not daring to move lest the slightest motion break the spell. When at last they had regained their senses, Khosrow dismounted and extended his hand; Shirin slipped from her horse with the grace of a dancer. For a moment they spoke. Khosrow told of his troubles, and Shirin invited him to the palace. Then her attendants found her; she ordered them to hasten to the queen with the happy news.

When Queen Mihin Banu learned of Khosrow's return, she was beside herself with joy. She prepared gifts worthy of a king and arranged for feasts and celebrations. She went forth herself to welcome him to the palace and scattered his path with jewels. But the most precious gift she had to offer was the princess Shirin. Though she could see how intensely Khosrow loved Shirin and how Shirin loved Khosrow, the good queen drew her niece aside and warned her that although Khosrow ruled with justice, she must guard herself against deceit. She must not satisfy all his desires lest he tire of her, for it was said that in the land of Persia he possessed a thousand beauties. "Keep your jewel, and he will be as addicted to you as to opium. Yield, and you will be a trampled flower before the world. If he is the moon, you are the sun," she counseled. And Shirin swore, by the seven heavens, that even if she wept tears of blood for love of Khosrow, she would not be his until she was his wife. And so the queen allowed Shirin to sit by Khosrow's side in the festivities, but forbade them to converse privately or be left to themselves.

How perfect for the lovers were these ecstatic days! The air sparkled; the sky was never so blue, the grass so thick with flowers. And never did Khosrow and Shirin leave one another's sight. In the mornings they would summon their attendants; then Shabdiz and Golgun would be led from the stable and they would ride to the polo field or to the hunt. Chasing after birds and game, Khosrow was astonished at the prowess of Shirin; her skill with the bow and her mastery of her horses's reins matched that of any man. She was a lioness, not a gazelle, and his heart pursued her eagerly. Yet at night when the dancing began, so light was her step that she seemed never to touch the ground.

Every night there were sumptuous feasts. Scarcely was one banquet finished

than the next began, and each was embellished with music, song, and wine, and poetry in praise of love. One evening, while gentle breezes wafted through the palace and cooled the heat of day, Shirin with ten attendants gathered at the foot of Khosrow's throne; each maiden recited poetry praising the love of Khosrow and Shirin. Then Shapur, who was among the company, told how he had awakened their love with his painting, and Shirin described the passion and amazement she had felt upon plucking the portrait from its bough. And Khosrow told the tale of a black lion that hunted a wild ass and was himself ensnared when the ass put a rope around his neck; thus was he, a powerful king, caught in the locks of Shirin's hair.

Now during these blissful days and nights Khosrow pleaded with Shirin to follow him to a secret place, an obscure corner of the court where they could talk of love and kiss, and not be seen. Mindful of her promise to the queen, Shirin resisted. Then, one evening, when they were walking unaccompanied in the palace gardens, Khosrow, flushed with wine, urged himself upon her with an overpowering embrace. Shirin rebuked him gently. "My love, we must not so forget ourselves in this enchanted garden that the garden of our future goes untended. Remember that you are a king, and a king deposed. If you would enjoy my bloom, salvage your good name, and let your state flower." And even as she spoke these words, Shirin was sweeter than all the roses in the arbor.

Thus was Khosrow spurred to action. Entrusting the welfare of his beloved to his faithful friend Shapur, he set out on Shabdiz the next morning for the kingdom of Byzantium. Without resting, he rode until he reached Constantinople, the great port city where the emperor had his residence. He went before that potentate and, pledging eternal friendship, asked for arms and men. Now the emperor paid heed, for he desired lasting peace with his powerful neighbor Persia. And when he ascertained from his astrologers that Khosrow's fortunes were on the rise, he agreed to give the young king a force of fifty thousand men. But the emperor was shrewd and required as a sign of their friendship that Khosrow marry his daughter Maryam and pledge that he would take no other wife besides.

Now Khosrow was sorely trapped. He loved Shirin beyond anything else on earth, and to enjoy her love he must redeem his crown. But how else could he regain his throne except by marriage to the Byzantine princess? He had his honor to avenge. Dreadful was his dilemma, for to pursue duty was to deny his love, and to deny duty was to deny his love as well. At last, with tortured heart, Khosrow consented to the contract, and to the joy of all Byzantium, the king of Persia and the princess Maryam were wed.

Immediately, the emperor mustered his army, and Niyatus was placed in command. They marched by night toward Persia. When the battle began, Khosrow

ملک بخت فرورده کورخت



went forth to meet Bahram Chubin accompanied by his adviser, the sage Bozorg Omid, who told him when to advance. The omens were auspicious, and the wicked Bahram Chubin was defeated; he fled toward China, and his men dispersed. Thus Khosrow regained his kingdom and was crowned in the capital city of Mada'in. There was great rejoicing throughout the land, but in his heart Khosrow could not rejoice, for he longed for Shirin. Sweeter than ever did she seem now, as sweet as the waters of life, and the days they had passed together seemed but a dream.

As Khosrow's fortunes changed, so did those of Shirin. Queen Mihin Banu had fallen ill, and soon breathed her last; the crown of Armenia was placed upon Shirin's unhappy head. She was desolate beyond description. She mourned the queen deeply, but even greater was her yearning for Khosrow. Shirin was filled with a longing that would not let her sleep.

Now Shirin was a just and gracious ruler; she abolished taxes, and her people prospered. Throughout the land perfect peace prevailed. The falcon drank together with the quail and the wolf lay with the lamb. Yet all the while her thoughts turned to Khosrow. When Shirin learned that Khosrow had regained his throne, she sent him many splendid gifts and asked every caravan for news of him. And then, with unbelieving ears, she heard of his marriage to the princess Maryam and his promise never to take another wife. Her unhappiness was so extreme that she could think of nothing else. Fearing that she would neglect her kingdom, she appointed a regent in her place and went with the faithful Shapur and a few attendants to the residence that had been built for her near Kermanshah, in Persia. Word of her arrival reached Khosrow. But the king, fearing Maryam's anger and her father's might, dared not go to her. Instead he sent for Shapur, and the good painter carried secret messages between the lovers.

Now in King Khosrow's court grand councils were held, followed by even grander feasts. One night, at a banquet, Khosrow drank too much wine and called for Barbad, the famous minstrel, to entertain the company. Barbad came before him and sang thirty songs about the love of Khosrow for Shirin and was rewarded by the king with jeweled robes and handsome gifts. So overwhelmed was Khosrow by the songs, and so emboldened by the wine, that he went to Maryam and told her that Shirin had left her kingdom for his sake and was languishing at her palace near Kermanshah. He asked Maryam to have Shirin brought to the palace Moshku as her slave. But Maryam was a jealous woman and refused, and vowed to kill Shirin should she ever see her. More than ever Khosrow longed to see Shirin, and so he sent Shapur to Shirin to beg her to meet him secretly in the palace Moshku; under cover of night, she was to slip past the gates—and Maryam's suspicious eye.

Shirin was indignant at so crass a plan. "Am I beneath the princess Maryam that I must crawl to Moshku in the dark?" she exclaimed. "Is Queen Shirin not as royal as Maryam and Khosrow? Khosrow has Shabdiz; if he would see me, let him ride to me!" And so she refused to go to Khosrow, and would speak no more of him.

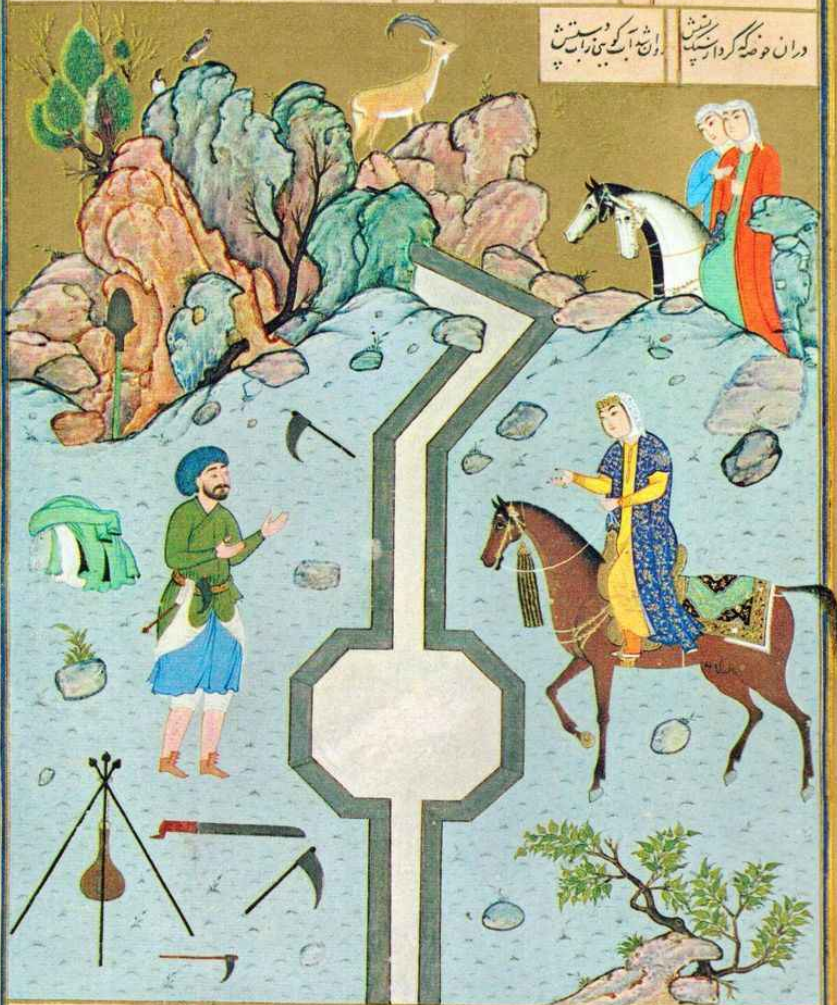
Now the palace near Kermanshah, as we have said, was in an unhealthy place, and Shirin thirsted for milk. She would have pastured her own cows, but the fields near the palace were overgrown with poisonous weeds. One night, when she was conversing with the good Shapur, she spoke of her desire for milk, and the painter recalled one Farhad, a youth of great skill and cleverness, who had studied with Shapur in China, under the same drawing master. Now Farhad had mastered the works of Euclid on geometry and the treatise of Ptolemy on the stars, but his accomplishments in engineering and sculpture were even greater. So deftly did he carve as to make even the most obdurate stone sing with joy as he chipped it with his chisel. Moreover he was said to be as strong as two elephants and to have the muscles of a bull.

Farhad was summoned to the palace near Kermanshah. When he arrived, he stood patiently outside Shirin's quarters, with his loins girded, his massive arms widespread. At last Shirin appeared and told him of her need for milk. What was needed was a channel from a distant pasture, where flocks grazed, to the palace. In the far-off field shepherds could pour milk into the trough; it would flow to the palace, where Shirin's servants could draw it for her. As she spoke, Shirin's voice was so sweet that Farhad fell completely in love with her. He stood entranced, scarcely able to comprehend her words. Afterward, when all was explained to him, he took his axe and shovel and set out. Within a month the channel was finished, and in the rock by Shirin's door Farhad dug a pool which was already foaming with milk. When Shirin saw what he had done, she praised him greatly. Unclasping two pearls that dangled from her ears, she gave them to him. Farhad, overwhelmed, fled to the desert, where he wandered, weeping and calling Shirin's name. The wild beasts came to comfort him; the lion was his pillow and the wolf sat at his feet. But his longing for Shirin could not be eased.

Soon, word of Farhad's devotion to Shirin reached Khosrow's court, and Khosrow ordered Farhad brought to him. When Farhad appeared the king showered him with gold. But Farhad stood unmoved—so deep was his love for Shirin. Then Khosrow tested Farhad's love with severe questions, and he was astonished at the youth's determination. At last, Khosrow asked Farhad to cut a road through a grim and towering mountain that blocked a route he wished to travel. Farhad agreed, but only on the condition that if he succeeded, he be given Shirin as his reward. To this Khosrow consented, for so difficult was the task

چو سار از نیک بوی ترا شد	بیشه روی خا را می تراشید	کرمی شد زیر حسن سنگ خرم	بنان از هم بر دایم آنم
دور وید سپنج از شاخ	ز جای کو سپندان آن درخ	چو دیا کرد جوی آشنگار	بیک ساز میان سپنگار
که حوض گوشش در سید بر	چو کار آمد با فر حوضه بست	که در درش میخند نویس	چنان تربیت کرد پندگی

دران حوض که کردار سپند
 در آن آب که بی درایتش



زبون باشت دست آویز	اگر صد که باید کند فولاد	کینا را نیایشه در کار	بنا بندها تواند بود و شوار
بای حوض بست و جوی شکار	حسب برودند شیرین را کوفه	بخزرون که ز عا بسته ماند	چه چاره کان نبی اودم شاد
بگرد جوی شیر و حوض بر	بهشی مگر آه پرسی آن شت	بجوض آمد بای پی در شستن شیر	خان که کو پندش نام و شکر

that he was sure Farhad would fail. And so Farhad was taken to Mount Bisutun.

As soon as he arrived, Farhad took his axe and carved from the forbidding stone first an image of Shirin and then one of Khosrow riding on Shabdiz. The images finished, his fearful work began. He labored day and night; so steadfastly did he wield his axe that word of his prowess spread from mouth to mouth. Even as he worked, he became a legend throughout Persia. Indeed, he paused only to gaze upon the likeness of Shirin, to kiss its feet and moan and weep, or to climb to the mountain top and call out to Shirin and plead his love.

When Shirin heard of Farhad's feat, for there was none in all the land who did not speak of it, she marveled greatly and set out for Mount Bisutun. When he saw her, Farhad so lost his senses that with one hand he beat his chest while with the other he continued to carve the rock. Not knowing what help to offer nor what words to say, Shirin drew a flask of milk from her saddlebag and, with trembling hands, gave it to Farhad. He drank it all in one draught, but it only increased his passion. When Shirin made ready to depart, her horse, exhausted by the steep climb up the mountainside, stumbled at its first step. Farhad lifted both horse and rider onto his shoulders and did not set them down again until he reached the gate of Shirin's residence. He returned to Bisutun, and worked with such ferocity that the road was soon nearly completed.

Khosrow, who kept close watch on his beloved, learned of Shirin's visit to Bisutun and of Farhad's progress. Greatly alarmed at the thought of Farhad completing his task, he summoned his advisers. The eldest of them, a cunning man, counseled him thus: "Magnificence, what is the true purpose of that youth's exertions but to win the heart and hand of the beautiful Shirin? What would he do if he were to learn that that heart had stopped and that hand was stilled by a mortal illness?"

And so a messenger was sent to Mount Bisutun, where he found Farhad cleaving the rock. "Why do you toil your life away like this, among these rocks, my friend?" he asked. "A strong young man like you should wield his chisel on a maiden!"

"I work for my king and for my love," Farhad replied with not a smile and not a break in the rhythm of his axe.

"And who might this love be?"

"Queen Shirin it is I love, for whom I have no words but my labors. Nor have I one more word for you!"

"Queen Shirin! Have you not heard? Shirin is dead but yesterday, taken by a fever. All her palace howls with grief!"

Without a word, Farhad flung away his axe so savagely that the blade split and quivered in the rock. He moaned and for the last time declared his love,

for then he threw himself from Mount Bisutun to his death. Now the axe of Farhad had a handle of pomegranate wood, and in the very place where it landed, the handle took root and sprouted into a tree. And even to this day, on the branches of that tree, fruit does grow.

When Shirin learned of Farhad's death, her grief was great. As time passed, she mourned more deeply still, for she understood how true Farhad had been. And she caused a dome to be built over his grave as a place of pilgrimage for faithful lovers. For his part, Khosrow was so tortured with remorse that he did not know a moment's peace. At last he sent a letter to Shirin, lamenting Farhad's fate and soothing her sorrow by reminding her that no one is immortal. Shirin joyfully kissed the letter in three places, and pondered every word. But soon she turned from Khosrow, knowing in her heart that he had crafted the destruction of Farhad.

Now it happened, shortly afterward, that the king's consort Maryam became ill and died. Khosrow wore robes of black and withdrew from his court, but he mourned only for display. In secret he rejoiced; no longer was he bound by his promise to the emperor of Byzantium. Shirin mourned for the princess for the time prescribed, for such was the duty of everyone in the land, but after a long while sent a reply to Khosrow's letter. Gently she reminded the king that there is good and bad in life, weddings and deaths, and now that Maryam was dead, there would be other brides for him. Khosrow, she tenderly wrote, should overcome his grief and take another wife. Whereupon Khosrow sent a messenger to tell Shirin that he would marry her at last.

But this was not to be, for while they were exchanging messages, Khosrow passed his time in feasting and enjoyment. All the rulers of the world came to his court to pay him homage. And one day, surrounded by splendid company, he playfully inquired as to where the most beautiful women in the world were to be found. The strongest claim was for the Persian city of Isfahan and for the beauty Shekar. The charms of Shekar were vividly described to him, yet for a year Khosrow waited, unsure of his desires. At last he saddled Shabdiz and set out for Isfahan. He was well received at Shekar's residence; a banquet was set, musicians played, and the lovely Shekar was brought to amuse him. Khosrow was entranced. But when, nodding from the wine, he was led to his chamber, Shekar sent one of her handmaidens in her place. The next morning the girl reported to her mistress that Khosrow was displeasing only in the sourness of his breath. Thereupon the playful Shekar revealed her trick to Khosrow and ordered him to return in a year's time; meanwhile he was to eat only certain foods.

In a year's time Khosrow dutifully returned and again, when night came, Shekar played her trick. At dawn she sent for him and told him that no man had

yet enjoyed her love. Khosrow went into the streets of Isfahan, and when he learned from the people that Shekar had spoken truly, he brought her to his capital as his bride. Such comfort did the beautiful Shekar provide that Khosrow soon forgot his realm and his love for Shirin.

When Shirin first heard of this, she hid her sorrow; as the gardener tends his flowers, so did she cultivate indifference. But for all her pretenses, her grief took hold like a tenacious weed, and she soon gave in to despair. The name of Khosrow was forbidden in her presence, and so troubled was she that she could not sleep. Each night seemed like a year; from sundown until daybreak she would pray to God to release her from her plight. At last her prayers were answered. In a short time Khosrow tired of his new companion, and once again began to think of Shirin.

One day Khosrow ordered a royal hunt of unsurpassed splendor to be arranged. Among his entourage were the emperor of China and the commander of the armies of Byzantium. Before them went youths, leading horses and scattering incense. Guards had been brought from far-off lands, and they rode on elephants. Musicians played drums and pipes, and banners flapped in the breeze. When it came time to hunt, the king's prize falcons were released, and within a week the fields and forests were despoiled of partridges and quail. Then Khosrow left the company and started toward Shirin's palace. It was winter, and the night was cold. He ordered a fire made from precious scented woods, and in the morning he warmed himself with several cups of wine. As he drank he stirred with longing, and sent a messenger ahead to tell Shirin's court of his arrival; he rode on in haste.

When word of Khosrow's approach reached the palace, Shirin had all the doors locked. Then she stationed attendants at the gate, and gave each a tray filled with gold coins to scatter before Khosrow. She caused a path to be made of carpets and embroidered cloths, and set attendants in readiness to burn aloe-wood when the king at last arrived. Then Shirin went to the roof of her palace to watch for him. First she saw dust, then Khosrow's companions, then Khosrow himself, carrying white narcissus, her favorite flower. At the sight of him in the distance, she fainted, but recovered quickly and retired to her chamber.

Khosrow was welcomed with great festivity. Gold was showered; silks were spread; tents were raised and covered with jeweled canopies. And in the largest tent of all stood a golden, six-legged throne especially for Khosrow. He was a joyful king as he triumphantly approached the palace door. But when he tried to enter he was amazed to find it locked. He questioned all who stood around and sent a message to Shirin, telling her that he had come to beg forgiveness at her feet, and he would remain in the courtyard until she showed herself to him.

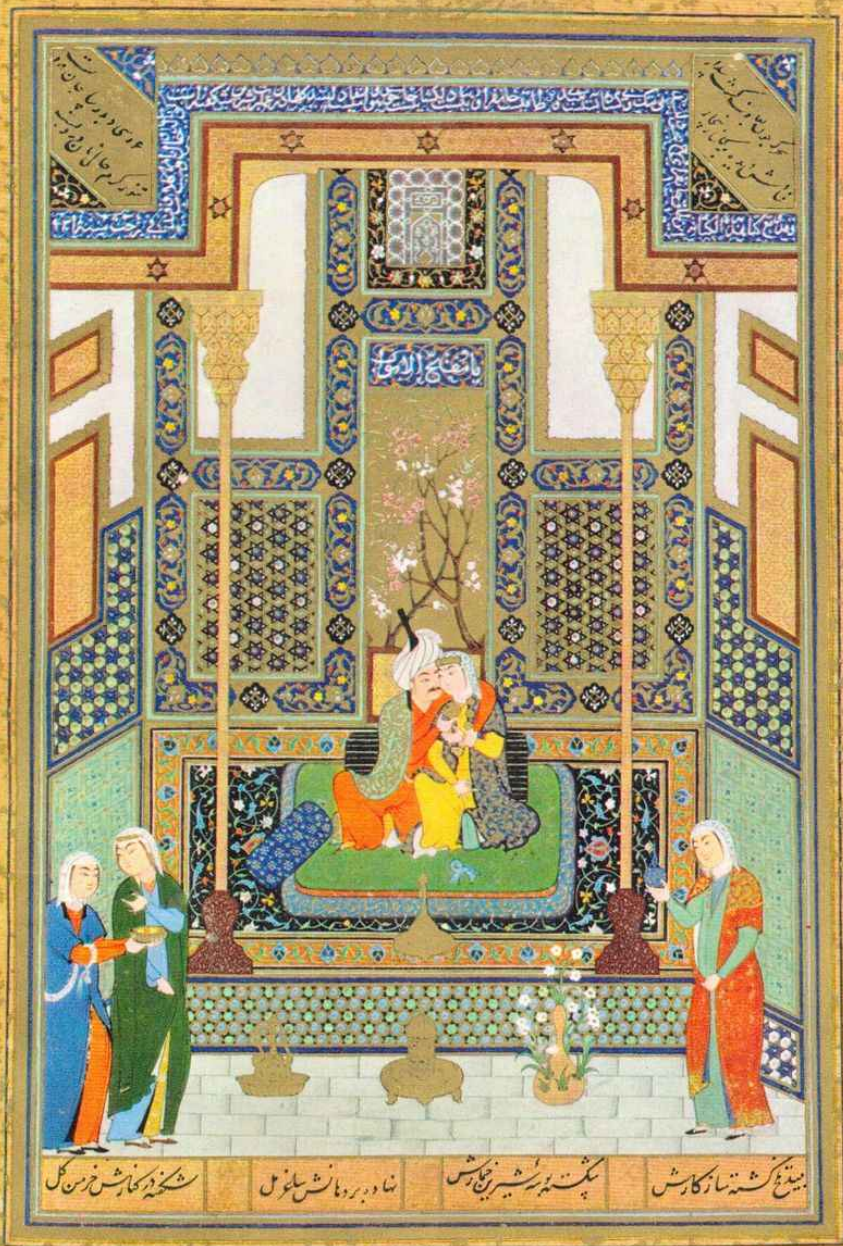
Shirin replied that she would only speak to him from her roof. Then she put on her finest robes and returned to the roof. When Khosrow saw her, he was so overcome that he kissed the ground. He praised her gifts—the gold, the silks, the throne—then reproached her for locking the door against him. Was this the way to treat an honored guest, no less a king?

Torn between desire and anger, Shirin wished Khosrow welcome with queenly dignity. But then desire succumbed to anger, and she bitterly described the sufferings she had endured. She reproached him for coming to her merry with wine. If he sought love, he must be sober and take her as his wife. If he sought only pleasure, let him return to Shekar and never come to her palace again. Thus they quarreled, Khosrow repenting and pleading the excesses of youth, Shirin thinking of her dishonor and of the faithful Farhad. What had Khosrow done to prove his love? With words as hard as ice she berated him, and at last in great despair he left the palace. Seeking sweetness he had found only bitterness. In the cold rain and snow he rode back through the forest to his hunting party. When he reached his tent he ordered his attendants to leave him alone with his sorrow and the faithful Shapur, who had followed him from Shirin's castle. All night long Khosrow was restless; he told Shapur that he still loved Shirin and the painter replied that lovers' quarrels are more show than substance. "What beauty is won with ease? Does not a rose have thorns? Take heart, my king! Fortune is good, and in the end all will be well!"

Now as she watched Khosrow depart, Shirin felt deep remorse, and wept. That night she saddled Golgun and, following the tracks of Shabdiz through the woods, found her way to Khosrow's camp. At the sound of hooves, Shapur ran out—the guards were drunk and sleeping—and helped Shirin dismount. She told him of her change of heart and asked two things: first, that Shapur hide her in the camp until such time as she should decide to show herself to Khosrow, and second, that Shapur was to help her return in safety to her palace if Khosrow refused to marry her. Shapur agreed; he tethered Golgun, hid Shirin, and returned to Khosrow's tent.

The king slept fitfully, and when he awoke he told Shapur that he had dreamt he was in a beautiful garden with a beautiful maiden at his side. Shapur told him that the maiden surely was Shirin, and that they would soon be reunited. In the meantime, Khosrow should celebrate this good omen with festivities. And so, the next day, as the sun descended from the sky, Khosrow called forth his cup-bearers and close attendants and drank and scattered gold. Then he dismissed all but Shapur and summoned the spell-binding musician Barbad.

Now there was in Khosrow's camp a second musician of unsurpassing skill. And Shirin asked Shapur to bring Nikisa, for this was his name, to the tent in



عزیز دهرستان
تو که عالم را در دست
تو که عالم را در دست

سوزد عالم را
تا شعله از سوزان
تا شعله از سوزان

شکسته در نمازش تو من گم

نهاد بر دمانش من گم

پیکت به شیرین گامش

بیدار گشته تا ز کارش

which she hid and to station him outside so that she could whisper instructions from within. "Let me direct him in my heart's true measures, while Barbad gives voice to Khosrow," she said.

So it was that the lovers conversed in song. Their music was as clear as the cold night air; each word shone like a star. First Nikisa sang for Shirin: she would not be a slave to Khosrow, yet her fury had been tempered and she would show sweetness to him. To which Barbad replied by pledging Khosrow's eternal love. Then Nikisa sang of loneliness: better for Shirin to die than live without Khosrow. In turn, Barbad bewailed Shirin's locked door; if she would come to Khosrow, he would make her his queen and never leave her side.

As Barbad sang, Khosrow was overwhelmed and spoke above the playing of the harp. He asked a hundred times for forgiveness and spoke so movingly of his devotion that Shirin, unable to restrain herself, cried out. When he heard her voice, Khosrow ran toward the tent in which she hid; she came forth, and he tried to embrace her. But Shirin drew back, reminding Khosrow that she would not be his until she was his wife. Then Khosrow ordered a marriage settlement be drafted; while this was being done, they would celebrate together. Shirin became insensible with happiness; she was so joyful and so lovely that Khosrow was enraptured, and he could not stop gazing on her beauty. For seven days did his eyes feast on her. Then Shirin went back to her palace riding in a golden litter, and Khosrow returned to the capital of Meda'in to make ready for the wedding. The royal astrologers scanned the heavens for auspicious omens and, after much deliberation, fixed upon a day. Then Khosrow sent a caravan of camels and horses laden with precious gifts to Shirin to bring her back. He summoned all his nobles and told them that Shirin would be his wife at last. They rejoiced and a splendid marriage took place on the appointed day.

No sooner had Khosrow and Shirin exchanged their vows and invoked God's blessing than the blue of the sky deepened to purple with the coming of night, and there was revelry throughout the land. The feasting and drinking at the royal palace was greater than ever before. The musicians Barbad and Nikisa played their harps until the early hours of the morning. Then, as the heavens began to lighten, Khosrow was carried to the bridal chamber to which Shirin, long wearied of the festivities, had withdrawn. When she saw that Khosrow was dazed by wine, she was angered and sent a wrinkled, hairy, hunchbacked old womanservant to him. It was a crone whom Khosrow took in his eager embrace; a crow in place of a beauty, a dragon instead of the moon. The king cried out and cursed, and threw her from the chamber. Shirin, well satisfied that Khosrow was not beyond his senses, dismissed the servant and went in to him.

As dawn broke, the lovers were united in a perfect love. The strength of the lion mingled with the sweetness of the rose. All that day and night, and even the next, and the day and night after that, they lingered within, until at last their joy was spent. Then Khosrow again sat on his throne, and all around him shared in his good fortune. He gave a great estate and the choice of Shirin's handmaidens for a bride to the faithful Shapur. And the good sage Bozorg Omid and the musicians Barbad and Nikisa were given brides as well.

For many years the reign of Khosrow and Shirin was a happy one. Khosrow was just, and his subjects knew prosperity, peace, and glory. The prophecy of his grandfather Khosrow Anushirvan was fulfilled, for Khosrow now possessed the four things promised him: the black stallion Shabdiz, the world's swiftest steed, was in his stable; Taqdis, the throne of thrones, covered with precious jewels, stood in his palace; in his banquet-hall played the musician Barbad, who with the touch of his harpstring surpassed all other minstrels, and at his side was his destined love, Shirin.

But fate is fickle, and in time the wheel of fortune turned. It so happened that a son had been born to Khosrow and the princess Maryam, and at the hour of his birth the signs were such that the astrologers shook their heads and sighed. Shiruyeh, as he was named, grew up just as the heavens foretold, a surly child and a stranger to his father. Even as a boy Shiruyeh plotted to seize the throne that one day would rightfully be his. Perceiving evil in his heart, Khosrow had thought to kill him, but he was restrained only by the wise Bozorg Omid, who counseled, "Might it not be, Magnificence, that from bad comes good? Who can know God's will?"

And so it came to pass that one day while Khosrow was praying, the wicked Shiruyeh invaded the palace with his forces and claimed the throne. Khosrow was put in chains and cast into a dungeon, and Shirin voluntarily went to prison with him. Great was Khosrow's grief, though Shirin comforted him gently day and night. In the darkness, for the thick stone walls would admit not a single ray of sun, she would remind him that there is both good and evil in the world. Fortunes rise and fall; all things change. "The only constant in life," she said, "is inconstancy itself." Then she spoke of love and told him stories of the kind that close the eyes of anxious children. As he slept she paced back and forth to stay awake; for she was afraid that harm would come to them if they were both to sleep.

One night, as Khosrow slept, so weary was Shirin that she succumbed to sleep. It was a strange, eerie night, for not one star could be seen. And it was this night that a treacherous assassin crept into the dungeon through a chink in the stone wall, and made his way to Khosrow's cell. With his dagger, the killer stabbed



Khosrow in the liver, and ran off. Khosrow awoke to find himself wounded and close to death. He thirsted for water but would not disturb Shirin, for he knew how tired she was. The blood flowed from his wound, and without the slightest motion or whisper, Khosrow breathed his last.

Disturbed by the wetness of the blood-soaked robes, Shirin awoke. When she saw Khosrow, her heart went numb with sorrow, and she wept for hours on end. Then she asked her jailers for musk and camphor so that she could bathe Khosrow's body.

Now at the time Khosrow and Shirin were wed, Shiruyeh was only a boy. But even so, he lusted for Shirin, and ever since, he desired his father's wife as greedily as he coveted his father's throne. And so he sent a messenger to the dungeon to ask Shirin to marry him, promising her a life of luxury and ease. Shirin consented but requested first that all Khosrow's possessions be distributed among the poor. When this had been done, a golden bier was brought, and Khosrow's body was placed on it, and he was buried with great splendor. In the streets of the city Meda'in the people wept as the body was carried past. Kings and emperors came from distant lands, as far-off even as the Orient, to march in the funeral procession. And among them all went Shirin, dressed not in mourning but, to the astonishment of all, in robes of red and yellow.

When the procession reached the vault that housed the royal tombs, the bier was carried inside. Shirin followed and asked that she be left alone to say farewell to Khosrow and to think fondly of her future happiness. Shiruyeh, flushed with love and triumph, readily agreed. Shirin entered the vault, locked the door, and went to Khosrow's side. She covered him with kisses and, with a dagger she had hidden in her robes, fatally stabbed herself in the same place where Khosrow had been stabbed.

Now it is said by some that when her blood flowed over Khosrow's body, he awakened for a moment and the lovers kissed. Yet others say that Khosrow stirred not from his timeless sleep, but that the stars paused in their celestial course in stark amazement at a love so fine.

When all who were outside the vault learned of what has passed within, a great wailing arose and a year's mourning was decreed throughout the land of Persia. Shirin was buried beside her beloved, and above their graves an inscription was carved as a memorial to all who love. Thus were Khosrow and Shirin united for all eternity. And their story has been told and told again, and has become a legend, an inspiration to all lovers faithful and true, from that time to this very day.

Khosrow and Shirin

“Khosrow and Shirin” is the second poem of Nizami’s *Khamseh* and the first of his romantic epics. Its protagonists are Khosrow II, the last great Sasanian monarch, known as Parviz, the Victorious, and his mistress Shirin; their love was recorded by many historians, geographers, and travelers, among them the Muslims Tabari (Bal’ami), Ibn Rustah, Ibn al-Faqih, Yaqut, and the anonymous compiler of the *Compendium of History*. There are many descriptions of Khosrow’s palace at Ctesiphon, the palace of Shirin, and especially the grotto rock-carving at Taq-e Bustan, the figures of which were early associated in history and legend with Khosrow II, Shirin, and sometimes the engineer Farhad. The beautiful equestrian sculpture was said to be Khosrow mounted on the horse Shabdiz.¹ These archeological sites are located in close proximity along the ancient trade route to China, at the point where the plain of Mesopotamia meets the Iranian plateau.

According to these and other sources, the long and turbulent reign of Khosrow Parviz (590–628 A.D.) was characterized by a high, though ultimately exhausting, degree of military glory and courtly splendor. In return for political and military assistance against the usurper Bahram Chubin, Khosrow ceded part of Armenia to the Emperor of Byzantium and was married to his daughter Maryam. Although Nizami portrays Shirin as an Armenian princess, chroniclers did not consider her of royal blood. The name Shirin is a Persian word meaning sweet, and she has been variously claimed by Khuzistan and Syria.

Secondary figures in the epic also have some historical basis. The engineering feats of the herculean Farhad appear in several of the sources; and Barbad and Nikisa were the chief musicians at Khosrow’s court. Khosrow’s fabulous horse Shabdiz is also mentioned frequently.

The love of Khosrow and Shirin was early a popular subject with poets. Less than one hundred years after Khosrow’s death, the Arab poet Khalid ibn Fayyaz wrote of their romance. According to literary tradition, the first Persian love couplets were engraved on the walls of Shirin’s palace and were still legible and revered three centuries after she died. The wonders of the horse Shabdiz also figure in many ancient stories.

The great Ferdowsi devoted more than four thousand couplets to Khosrow II’s reign in his *Shah-nameh*, or *Book of Kings*, composed at the end of the tenth and the beginning of the eleventh century A.D. In this account, from which Nizami drew his inspiration, the youthful Khosrow took Shirin as his mistress and forgot her when he became king. Later, while on the way to hunting, he saw her on the terrace of her house and was again enflamed by her beauty. Despite opposition from the aristocracy and religious leaders because she was a commoner, they were married. Shirin then secretly poisoned Khosrow’s first wife, the Byzantine princess Maryam. This dreadful act embittered Khosrow and Maryam’s son Shiruyeh and, afraid of retaliation, Khosrow imprisoned him. When, in a military coup, Shiruyeh was freed, he in turn imprisoned Khosrow and had him assassinated. He spared Shirin only because he wanted her as his wife. Shirin agreed to marry her stepson, but she demanded that she retain control of her inherited wealth and that she be allowed to mourn at Khosrow’s tomb. After distributing her assets among the poor and the temples and contributing to the construction of inns for travelers, she went to the grave, took strong poison, and died at Khosrow’s side.

Khosrow, Shirin, and Farhad are also celebrated in the poetry of Qatran, the eleventh-century court poet of Tabriz and Ganjeh. In the same era, Gurgani explored

various aspects of love and passion in his *Vis and Ramin*, using an historical-legendary theme from ancient Eastern Iran. But Nizami was the first to fulfill all the prerequisites of romance—far-off times and places, with giants, dragons, and heroic exploits; sentimental and idealistic exaggerations that still preserved the individual events so dear to the Near Eastern reader; and reflection on the human condition.

Most important, Nizami gave this material a real structural unity. Infusing the story with his own profound experience of love and expanding it with his thoughts on religion, philosophy, and government, he created a romance of great dramatic intensity. The story has a constant forward drive with exposition, challenge, mystery, crisis, climax, resolution, and, finally, catastrophe. The action increases in complexity as the protagonists face mounting complications. For instance, Khosrow and Shirin are not able to meet for a long time, despite their untiring efforts and the help of their confidant. Then, after they do meet, they are forced apart by the political marriage of Khosrow and Maryam. When Khosrow promises Shirin to Farhad as a prize for completing a feat of daring and endurance, the story nearly comes to a premature conclusion.

After the death of Maryam and the murder-suicide of Farhad, it seems that all obstacles are removed and the lovers will be united. But Nizami introduces an affair between Khosrow and a girl from Isfahan that further complicates and delays his union with Shirin. Finally, on the lovers' wedding night, Nizami creates a bizarre episode, a humorous entr'act that gives the reader or listener a chance to take a deep breath before the epic's tragic climax. Khosrow gets drunk and Shirin replaces her presence in the nuptial chamber with that of a knotty, wizened old crone. Through these dramatic devices Nizami makes a powerful commentary on human behavior, on its follies, its glories, its struggles, and its unbridled passions and tragedies.

Nizami's deep understanding of women is strongly expressed in "Khosrow and Shirin." Shirin is the central character and there is no question that she is a poetic tribute to Nizami's wife Afaq. She is well-educated, independent, fearless, resourceful, imaginative, erotic, and humorous. Her loyalty knows no bounds. That she is a queen rather than a commoner gives the story a

stately quality. Her association with Armenia is, perhaps, a reflection of its geographical proximity to Ganjeh.

Shirin, like the Byzantine Maryam, was a Christian. Nizami was a pious Muslim, but he tolerated and respected other religions.

Shirin's sense of justice is so great that she forswears Khosrow's love until he should regain his throne, thus fulfilling his responsibility to his people. Even after they are married she continues to exert a strong influence on Khosrow, educating him as always through example and love. As a result the country flourished, justice was observed and strengthened, and science, religion, and philosophy thrived.²

Shirin is democratic, companionable with the faithful painter-messenger Shapur and sensible of the depth of Farhad's wordless devotion. Though she is prey to jealousy and loneliness, she is master of her passions and is capable of the ultimate renunciation, death for love.³

In contrast, Khosrow is governed by his predilection for sumptuous living and personal expediency. He is selfish and vacillating. He basely tricks Farhad, forcing him wittingly to suicide. However, when he comes upon Shirin bathing in a wilderness pool, he chivalrously averts his eyes; and when he knows that his end is near, rather than wake the exhausted Shirin, he allows himself to bleed to death in silence. Nizami portrays this final act in such a way that it becomes a remission of Khosrow's previous sins.

The tension between the strength of Shirin and the weakness of Khosrow is enhanced dramatically by Nizami's tight control of plot and setting, and in his development of the towering figure of Farhad. Episodes of meeting and of missing, of searching and of waiting, are richly entwined with scenes of the barren desert and of luxurious court life. Asceticism vies with sensuality.

Nizami's use of allegories, parables, and words with double meaning raised the Persian language to a new height. Though always pure, Nizami's poetry is elaborate and flamboyant, playing on all the senses at once. The poem is written in the light, flowing, graceful *Hazaj mussadas maqsur* meter, deliberately imitating that used by Gurgani in *Vis and Ramin*. It scans as follows:

○ --- / ○ --- / ○ --- // ○ --- / ○ --- / ○ ---
There are about 6,500 couplets.

Composed after the mystico-didactic *Makhzan al-*

Asrar, its exact date of completion is uncertain. The year 576 A.H./1180 A.D. is given in some manuscripts, but many scholars believe, because of internal evidence, that it was finished after 581 A.H./1184 A.D. In an autobiographical passage woven into the text, Nizami says that he has lived for forty years. That must be construed as a conventional number, but, in any case, scholars disagree by six years, from 535–541 A.H./1140–1146 A.D., as to the date of his birth. Nor are the three dedicatory invocations—to Sultan Tughrol II and to his regents, Atabeg Muhammad Jahan Pahlavan and Atabeg Qizil Arslan—useful in establishing a secure date. Although Atabeg Muhammad Jahan Pahlavan was the ruler of Ganjeh where Nizami lived, and Atabeg Qizil Arslan gave Nizami title to a village, these dedications may well have been added by Nizami for political reasons or may be later interpolations. The earliest extant text, dating from 763 A.H./1362 A.D., was written some one hundred and fifty years after Nizami's death and is suspected to contain many apocryphal verses.⁴

Nizami may have written "Khosrow and Shirin" to express his happiness during his marriage to Afaq, but the idealization of womanly chastity, purity, and devotion, the recurrent theme of renunciation, and the tragic ending make it seem more probable that it was written as a memorial to her after her untimely death. Its passages instructing their son Muhammad in the ways of virtue may possibly be interpreted as a sign of Nizami's strong affection and concern for a motherless boy. These exhortations are contained mainly in the postscripts in which Nizami muses about the transiency and vanity of life on earth. Only religion is sure. As part of the conclusion, Nizami relates a dream Khosrow had about the prophet Muhammad, toward the end of his reign; it had such an impact on the king that he could not sleep for several months.

The great Persian authority on Nizami, Vahid Dastgerdi, calls "Khosrow and Shirin" "the best historical fable of love and chastity, the treasure of eloquence, counsel, and wisdom."⁵ The foremost Russian specialist, E. É. Bertels, believes that "Khosrow and Shirin" is "one

of the great masterpieces, not only in the Azarbaijani but in world literature. For the first time in the poetry of the Near East, the personality of a human being has been shown with all its richness, with all its contradictions and ups and downs."⁶ J. Rypka in his comprehensive study of Iranian literature writes of "Khosrow and Shirin": "It is the story of the love and sorrow of a princess and a woman and a wife, in its sincerity unequalled by any other work in Persian literature."⁷

In this volume we are presenting the first English version of Nizami's "Khosrow and Shirin."

1. This rock-carving, situated some six miles northeast of the city of Kermanshah, is still not definitely identified and dated. It represents a royal investiture, a common artistic theme during the Sasanian period.

2. At last Khosrow finds time to pursue his interest in philosophy, science, and religion. With his mentor, Bozorg Omid, he discusses the questions that have occupied the Persian mind for centuries: Where do we come from? What are we here for? Where do we go? They examine the characteristics of the earth and climate, and the formation of the universe. As Khosrow II was a contemporary of the prophet Muhammad, they discuss Islam and his philosopher-adviser urges him to look upon it as God's true revelation. The historical Khosrow was a Zoroastrian, the national religion of the Sasanian Empire.

3. The Russian scholar E. É. Bertels gives an interesting interpretation of Shirin as a victim of her own fate. Her idealization of her beloved leads to disappointment when it undergoes the test of reality. The strength of Shirin lies in her rising above disenchantment, in her persistent belief that one day Khosrow will measure up to her heroic imagination. See E. É. Bertels, *Nizami, Tvorcheskiy Put Poeta* (Moscow, 1956), p. 123.

4. E. É. Bertels (op cit., p. 103) and J. Rypka (*The Cambridge History of Iran*, Cambridge University Press, 1968, vol. 5, p. 580) think that "Khosrow and Shirin" was commissioned by Sultan Tughrol II, who asked for a romantic poem without being specific about its theme. In the postscript to "Khosrow and Shirin" there is praise of Atabeg Qizil Arslan, who feted Nizami when he was in the vicinity of Ganjeh. Nizami was not a court poet, but this tribute made him very happy. He describes in detail the respect and kindness with which he was received by the ruler. This postscript is a later addition because the poem which Atabeg Qizil Arslan thought so highly of was "Khosrow and Shirin."

5. Vahid Dastgerdi, critical edition of "Khosrow and Shirin" (Tehran, 1933), p. 1.

6. E. É. Bertels, *Nizami, Tvorcheskiy Put Poeta* (Moscow, 1956), p. 124.

7. J. Rypka, *History of Iranian Literature* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1968), p. 211.